JUST AS WE ARE
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Psalm 66:8–20
John 21:1–17

"Do you love me? . . .
Feed my sheep."
John 21:17 (NRSV)

No event of your life, whatever its character, can imprison you. . . .
This is what the Resurrection is all about.
Not even death is capable of telling us what God has to say about life.
I shall not allow the events of my life to make me their prisoner. . . .
I shall continually believe that God is not through,
not merely with life, but with me. . . .
When I die, I will go down to the grave with a shout,
because life is not through even in death.
This is what Jesus discloses in his trumpet call:
"I am the Resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will never die."
This is the growing edge.

Howard Thurman
The Growing Edge

It is quiet on the beach before dawn. There are a few awake early, walking, looking for shells, but only a few. It is an experience of solitude. Often the ocean and the air are relatively still. The only sound comes from the seagulls, looking for breakfast. Before the sun is up, you can't really see the horizon: sea and sky, uniformly gray, melt into each other. If you are on the beach before dawn, it is almost impossible not be become reflective, prayerful.

I don't know whether I love this story so much because of the beach; or because of the meal, the breakfast of charcoaled fish and bread, which, frankly, has always sounded delicious to me, almost irresistible; or because what follows is such a luminously, personally human story that resonates deeply in my soul without anyone explaining it to me.

The last time they were together was the absolutely worst day in Peter's life. The last time Peter's eyes met Jesus' eyes was in the courtyard of the High Priest on the night Jesus was arrested. Jesus was inside being interrogated. Peter had followed from a safe distance. It was a cold night.

Someone had built a fire. Peter was there, with some others, warming himself.

Earlier, that very evening, when Jesus and his disciples were at dinner and Jesus had predicted that he might suffer and die, Peter had bravely claimed that he would lay down his life for Jesus. Jesus responded by saying that Peter was capable of denying him and, in fact, would do so before the night was gone.

Standing around the fire, warming himself, Peter was startled when a woman recognized him.

“You are one of his followers, aren’t you?” she asked.

Peter said, “I am not.”

A second and a third time during that long, terrible night—Jesus inside being interrogated, the guards, housemaids, the night shift, a few stragglers, people who show up to be part of a public spectacle or tragedy, clustered around a fire—a second and third time Peter was challenged: “Did I not see you in the garden with him?” And Peter, finally, with a curse —“Damn it, man—I don’t know him; I never saw him before!”—denied Jesus.

As dawn appeared and a cock crowed, the guards led Jesus out of the house, through the courtyard, and their eyes met. It was the worst time of Peter’s life. He slowly walked away, his head down, to hide his tears, his bitter tears of disappointment.

Jesus was crucified the next day. Peter and the others, with the exception of one—John—stayed away, watched from a safe distance. With the others, Peter was hiding in a room in Jerusalem on the first day of the week when the women returned from the tomb, babbling about the body being gone. With John, Peter ran to the tomb and looked in and saw for himself. And then for days he and the others had stayed in that room, out of sight. Some of them claimed to have seen him; some doubted. Some weren’t sure what to think.

Peter’s heart, among them all, was full of remorse and guilt. Dear Jesus had been cruelly tortured and put to death and Peter had done exactly what Jesus said he would do. He hadn’t died with Jesus. He had denied even knowing him to save his own skin.

Now they were home again, back in Galilee. “I am going fishing,” Peter said. The others joined him and they spent the night doing what they knew how to do: finding refuge in the familiar—the boat, the oars, the sail, the feel of the net in their calloused hands, the quiet. No one spoke. At dawn

someone saw a man, or at least it looked like a man, on the beach. The form was familiar, the way he stood there, the way he leaned over to place wood on the small fire. It looked like Jesus.

And so Peter plunged into the ocean and swam to shore, and when the others arrived, hauling the now full nets, Jesus invited them to eat breakfast with him. No one said a word. What possibly could they say? They stared at the fire as he gave them a piece of cooked fish and bread. Hungry, they ate eagerly. No one spoke, the only sound the gulls, the water lapping at the hull of the boat, the crackling of the embers.

“Peter, do you love me?” Jesus broke the silence. “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

“Feed my lambs,” and then silence.

“Do you love me, Peter?”

“Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Silence.

“Do you love me, Peter?” a third time. Just as he denied knowing Jesus three times, standing around the fire in the courtyard on that terrible night, now three times Jesus asks, “Do you love me” and three times Peter says, “Yes, Lord, I love you.” I imagine tears, Peter’s tears, tears of remorse and grief and embarrassment, and relief and joy, and a new, a brand new, sense of devotion.

There is a lot going on here that sounds and feels familiar. Peter’s disappointment, for instance; Peter’s pain and simple embarrassment. Can you imagine it? His friends heard his boast at the Last Supper: “Lord, I will die with you.” It had inspired them, frightened them: “Of course, of course, we will stay together; one for all, and all for one; if he dies, we die with him.” Their denial happened earlier—when they fled into the night when the guards arrested him. But they had not boasted as he did. John was with Peter at the fire in the courtyard. John heard Peter deny knowing Jesus, heard all three denials. Peter was embarrassed, humiliated. There is no pain quite like failing so publicly to live up to other’s expectations, no pain quite like failing so spectacularly to do what you boasted you could and would do.

But there is a deeper pain. If the first is public pain, this is spiritual pain. It is the experience of failing to live up to your own self-expectations. Sometimes it is superficial. Anyone who has ever played a sport, knows—and feels a little silly about—the enduring pain from the memory, years, decades ago, of striking out with the bases loaded, missing the critical free throw, dropping the game-winning pass. Self-disappointment stays in a

deep place in the human spirit. Sometimes it is not superficial. Sometimes it is a matter of not being the kind of person we want to be or see ourselves as being. Sometimes the pain is precipitated by personal rejection, a college application, job search, or intimate relationship. Sometimes it comes when we stumble morally and lose our bearings.

It is a powerful dynamic. In a conversation with friends about children and grandchildren and changing practices of what we used to call "discipline," a friend of mine said that her mother rarely scolded her, never spanked her. She didn't have to. The most devastating thing her mother could do to her was say, "Oh, Anne Louise, I'm so disappointed in you." I called her to check it out and she said, "It still makes me cry."

If you have high expectations you know deep disappointment. My problem with American military intelligence practices at Abu Ghraib, the practice of torture, is not because I disrespect our military but precisely the opposite. It is because I respect our armed forces and our high standards, the highest in the world. My problem with drugs and baseball is a matter of high expectations not being met.

On a personal level, failure, the reminder and memories of failing to live up to one's own expectations, can become painful baggage that we carry with us all our lives, pain that can paralyze us. That's what is going on, I think, as Jesus' eyes meet Peter's that morning on the beach. There is unfinished business being transacted here. It is the matter of Peter's salvation: his forgiveness and ability to forgive himself. His leadership is at stake here, his ability to live openly and freely, his peace of mind, and his freedom to give the rest of his life away in love.

It is a moment of pure grace when Peter experiences, in the plainest way imaginable, the grace of God through Jesus Christ, the unconditional acceptance, forgiveness, and love of God in spite of what he has done, given to him, simply and plainly, in charcoaled fish and toasted bread, by Jesus.

So the late Howard Thurman, a distinguished African American theologian, was moved to write, "No event in your life can imprison you. This is what resurrection is about. I shall not allow the events of my life to make me their prisoner. . . . I shall continually believe that God is not through with life, or with me" (*The Growing Edge*).

What Jesus did not say to Peter is as important as what he did say. It would seem only natural at least to refer to Peter's glorious failure, to name it, to set the context for this meeting on the beach by rehearsing or at least mentioning the last time, in the courtyard, at night, Peter standing in front of the fire warming himself, denying that he ever knew Jesus, and their eyes meeting. Jesus does not embarrass Peter further, does not ask for a simple

apology, an acknowledgement that something is wrong, some acceptance of responsibility, some promise that it will never happen again. What happens, instead, is grace: the pure, unconditional love of God in Jesus Christ for Peter and his rebirth, his restoration, his redemption.

There is a catch, however. It has to do not with Peter's status as a beloved child of God, embraced, welcomed into the circle of Jesus' friends. That is accomplished. The case is closed. The catch is, what next: "Do you love me, Peter?" . . . "Feed my lambs. . . . Tend my sheep. . . Feed my sheep." There is work to do now, not to earn acceptance, forgiveness, and restoration. That has been given. There is work to do, lambs to feed, sheep to tend, in order fully and authentically to love Jesus and trust him and live for him.

This is not cheap forgiveness, no cost, "cheap grace," Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it. This grace is given without condition, to be sure, but it cost the life of God's Son. And to know it, to appropriate it, to internalize it so that your life is recreated and redeemed by it means to live it, to feed the lambs, to tend the sheep.

In a book on forgiveness, Gregory Jones, Dean of Duke Divinity School, talks about what he calls "therapeutic forgiveness" and the therapeutic nature of a lot of religion. That would be a religion whose sole focus is self-enhancement, self-fulfillment, self-understanding, self-actualization, a religion circumscribed entirely by the perimeters of the self, a religion whose purpose is to make you feel good about yourself, a religion, that is to say, characterized by much of what goes by the name "spirituality." That is not what we mean by Christianity, Jones says.

Christianity is the discovery of the amazing grace of God, the miracle that I am loved and forgiven and accepted by God, the grace that cost the life of God's Son. And Christianity is the grateful response to that amazing grace lived out in faithful trust and love and service to others.

Peter is given his salvation and his commission to discipleship, work to do. "If you love me, Peter, feed my sheep." He will be the leader. He will be the strong, inspiring leader of the early Christian movement, and in a few years he too will be arrested and crucified, upside down—at his own insistence, tradition has it, so as not to be confused with the previous crucifixion of his Lord.

"If you love me, feed my sheep." Peter learns the lesson and is equipped to lead by serving. He learns to be a servant leader, which turns out to be the only real leadership. Twenty centuries later we are relearning, in the wake of an epidemic of abuse by leaders, misuse of the prerogatives and responsibility of leadership in corporate America, we are relearning that

true leadership begins with service, with love, for coworkers, employees, customers—in a deep and profound sense, love for and service to the world.

Leadership in the church, as we have expressed it today in the traditional ordination and installation of officers, is not privilege so much as it is service, oftentimes quiet, not very noticeable, steady, necessary service. And at the very heart of this church, so very blessed by the grace of God and the generosity of those who have gone before, is the sense that God continues to bless us and calls us here—not for privilege but to serve, to feed and tend the lambs.

You don't have to look far. That's what Chicago Lights is: a cluster of ministries reaching out to our neighbors in the name of Christ—in counseling services; hospitality and resources for older adults; tutoring for youngsters; food, clothing, and support for the homeless.

If you love me, feed my sheep.

Jesus so wisely, so compassionately, welcomed Peter back to the family, forgave Peter, restored Peter, saved Peter's soul from a lifetime of guilt and self-recrimination and destructive self-doubt by loving him and feeding him.

It is so complex, so deeply implicated in our hearts and psyches, in our sense of our self-worth or non-worth, our relationship with parents and family and lovers, and memories of failures and expectations not met. And it is so simple. Jesus Christ came to show us that God loves and wants us in spite of who we are or what we have done or left undone. Jesus Christ came to show that God loves and wants us just as we are.

Author Reynolds Price says this story of Jesus and Peter on the beach contains the one sentence that we crave more than any other: "The maker of all things loves and wants me" (*Incarnation: Contemporary Writers on the New Testament*, p. 72).

So I invite you this morning, in the quiet of your heart, whoever you are, whatever you are carrying with you, whatever memories of failures or missed expectations, whatever self-doubt—I invite you to put yourself on the beach in the early light of dawn and to accept his gifts, his food, his love and grace and welcome.

> Just as we are, we come.
> Just as we are, O Lamb of God, we come.